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AUTHOR White, Ken W.
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ABSTRACT

Functional communication emphasizes the uses that communication serves in everyday interaction and places particular importance on the context in which the functions are performed. A practical means for integrating functional communication instruction into adult education environments is the learning community method. Learning community students synthesize knowledge and information from a spectrum of different points of view, concentrate on dialogue and collaborative learning with their instructors and peers, and experience the dominant functional uses of communication in daily life. The general goal of the learning community is to provide a holistic structure through which students can synthesize different subject areas and/or courses and give coherence to their general learning experience. Distinctive features of learning communities include: common themes, a sense of purpose, reduced isolation of faculty members from one another and from students, relating of faculty members to one another as specialists and educators, continuity and integration in the curriculum, and group identity and cohesion. Learning communities also encourage greater intellectual interaction between students, between students and faculty, and between faculty members. Interaction is active and vocal in a learning community setting, not limited to the often mechanical and routinized interaction of traditional lectures, term papers, and examinations. (Sixteen references are attached.) (MG)

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Functional Communication in Adult Education:
A Learning Community Method

Ken W. White

Instructional Communication Specialist/
Developmental Education Instructor
Everett Community College
801 Wetmore Avenue
Everett, Washington
(206) 259-7151 x261

Doctoral Student
Department of Speech Communication
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss theoretical and practical issues concerning the role functional communication instruction can play in the adult learning environment. I argue that functional communication offers a theoretical framework for improving the communication abilities of adult students. Development of my argument is in three stages. First, I discuss the oral communication needs of adult learners. Second, I summarize the functional perspective. Third, I suggest a learning community model as an practical means for integrating functional communication instruction into adult education programs.

Functional Communication In Adult Education: A Learning Community Method

Communication Needs of Adult Learners

In 1971, the University of Texas at Austin began its major study of adult literacy in the United States. Four years later, the Adult Performance Level (APL) Project reported that more than half of the U.S. adult population were unable to perform the primary "life coping skills" needed in order to lead productive and successful lives. Shelton (1982) points out that the study redefined adult literacy as minimum competencies an adult must possess in order to function successfullyin our expanding technological society. Literacy was seen as a set of skills applied to a set of knowledge areas.

A major consequence of the APL definition of adult literacy is its concentration on communication skills. In fact, all the life coping skills measured in the APL project, except computation, are directly related to communication, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, problem solving and interpersonal relations. The study's recognition of the need for increased communication instruction at the adult level is reiterated by other researchers such as Adler (1982) who recommends speech communication instruction for students at all levels, The College Board (1983) which lists listening

and speaking among the six basic competencies needed by students for a successful higher education experience. and Miller and Tyndall (1982) who report that the Community College Section of the Speech Communication Association has recommended that "study in speech communication should be a component of all developmental programs" (p. 33).

Unfortunately, most college adult basic education programs have apparently not responded to the call for more concentration on oral communication. Gruenberg (1983) surveyed three hundred colleges and universities to determine which features of basic skills programs were considered vital to success. Administrators and coordinators of the programs who responded to the survey defined the three most important basic skills as reading, writing and mathematics. Though Gruenberg's findings are hardly surprising, they are significant for suggesting what respondents did **not** consider vital: oral communication skills were not mentioned by those who responded to the survey.

Clearly, two reasonable conclusions can be drawn. First, if adult learners need basic oral communication skills in order to survive in our institutions and to become more effective in their daily lives, then it makes sense to include instruction which teaches functional communication skills in the adult education curriculum. Second, adult educators need to become more aware of instructional methods

that facilitate the integration of such oral communication skills into their classrooms and programs.

Functional Communication for Adult Instruction

A theoretical approach for teaching oral communication skills to adult learners is the functional communication model. Functional communication emphasizes the uses that communication serves in everyday interaction and places particular importance on the context in which the functions are performed. Thus, it serves the multifaceted needs of today's adult learners. As Larson, Backlund, Redmond and Barbour (1978) state, "In the face of mounting evidence that these interactive skills may be what distinguish the 'survivors' from the 'nonsurvivors' in academic, vocational, and social contexts, we have come to realize that they are a vital aspect of basic education" (p. vii).

Like the APL study, functional communication grew out of the minimal competencies or "basics" movement that had surfaced in education in the 1970s. Its greatest sense of direction was given by the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competencies. In their efforts to find an organizing model for communication, members of the Speech Communication Association Task Force turned to the speech function.

Though much of the original research concerning

functional communication began with children, the approach is relevant to adult education. In their final report edited by Allen and Brown (1976), members of the task force for the national project presented the functional communication model based upon the belief that "functional speech communication behaviors are significant enough that they must be progressively and continuously emphasized throughout the school experience" (p. v). Brown (1978) argues that functional communication has major implications for various forms of adult education, "all of which derive from the presumption that the development of ability in functional communication ought to be as integral a part of lifelong learning as it is a part of learning in the early childhood and adolescent years (p. 9).

For example, functional communication stresses Wells' (1973) five categories of communication functions which reflect the dominant uses of communication in daily life. As it is common to see adults who are unable to meet the expectations of social situations, Wells' categories offer a heuristic framework with which adult learners can understand and develop social skills in a variety of everyday contexts:

> Controlling. These are acts in which the participants' dominant purpose is to control behavior. These acts include behaviors such as commanding, offering, suggesting, permitting, threatening, warning, prohibiting, contracting, refusing, bargaining,

rejecting, acknowledging, justifying, persuading, and arguing.

Feeling. These are acts in which participants' dominant purpose is to express feelings and attitudes as an affective response. These acts tend to be spontaneous and are manifested because of the satisfactions they carry for the participants. Behaviors such as exclaiming, expressing a state or an attitude, taunting, commiserating, tale-telling, and blaming are included here.

Informing. These are acts in which the participants' purpose is to offer or seek information. These acts include behaviors such as stating pieces of information, questioning, answering, justifying, naming, pointing out an object, demonstrating, explaining, and acknowledging.

Ritualizing. These are acts that serve primarily to maintain social relationships and to facilitate social interaction. Such acts include greeting, taking leave, participating in verbal games, reciting, taking turns in conversations, participating in culturally appropriate speech modes, and demonstrating culturally appropriate amenities.

Imagining. These are acts that cast the participants in imaginary situations. These acts include creative

behaviors such as role-playing, fantasizing, speculating, dramatizing, theorizing, and storytelling.

A functional communication skills-based curriculum also responds to the adult's academic needs by utilizing the learner's wealth of experience. Wulff (1981) implies how functional communication can start with the lived experience of its learners and "can aid teachers in creating interest and enthusiasm in students simply because it uses the contexts of students' interaction as the basis for studying and developing communication skills" (p. 8). For example, the challenges of child rearing can supply fruitful role-playing situations for adult students to share and develop the controlling and feeling uses of communication.

Additionally, functional communication's contextual approach can be just as readily applied to the adult's vocational needs. Wolvin (1984) suggests the approach's job-related potential with adult learners when he recognizes that "communication skills are important to the effective functioning of adults in social and in career settings, and adults have come to recognize the importance of these skills" (p. 268). For example, adult students can practice the informing function of communication by collecting and presenting work-related information to their classmates.

Consequently, by classifying communication by functions, functional communication increases the adult learner's

awareness of the general transactions that occur between people in specific contexts -- at school, work and home. By emphasizing the uses that communication skills serve in everyday interaction and by placing particular importance on the context in which those skills are performed, functional communication gives adult educators a useful way of addressing the adult learner's communication needs.

A Learning Community Method

A practical means for integrating functional communication instruction into adult education environments is the learning community method. Allen, Brown and Yatvin (1986) state, "The functional perspective . . . recognizes that the language arts skills and processes are integrated, that oral language is the essential communication mode from which they derive, that form and structure in language follow function" (p. xi). Likewise, learning community students synthesize knowledge and information from a spectrum of different points of view, concentrate on dialogue and collaborative learning with their instructors and peers, and experience the dominant functional uses of communication in daily life.

The general goal of a learning community is to provide a holistic structure through which students can synthesize different subject areas and/or courses and give coherence to their general learning experience. For example, a Federated

Learning Community (FLC), developed by Patrick Hill at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1972, is a group of usually three or four courses organized around a general theme. The goals of FLCs usually concentrate on faculty development and integrative learning in a large class environment. On the other hand, "Linked Courses" can give curricular coherence and focus to writing in smaller contexts by having two or more faculty members coordinate syllabi and assignments.

Although learning communities vary regarding their degree of coordination, they hold certain characteristics in common. The Study Group of the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (1984) proposes a number of distinctive features of learning communities: common themes; a sense of purpose; reduced isolation of faculty members from one another and from students; relating of faculty members to one another as specialists and educators; continuity and integration in the curriculum; and group identity and cohesion. In addition, learning communities encourage greater intellectual interaction between students, between students and faculty, and between faculty members.

In support of a functional perspective, learning communities create environments where language skills and processes can be integrated. At Everett Community College's Adult High School Completion Program, this is accomplished by having independent study students from different subject

areas group according to themes. For example, students studying Washington State history are combined with those in a contemporary problems class. Together, they decide on a general theme such as "Employment Alternatives in Washington State." Individual students then choose topics like "Health Hazards in Washington's Aerospace Industry" and write term papers. Students remain in their groups throughout the quarter, identifying and refining themes, reviewing each other's rough drafts and finally presenting their papers as a panel. In this way, adult students integrate reading, writing, listening and speaking skills around a common theme in a functional context where the purpose is to communicate information to a real audience.

And like the functional approach, learning communities often use oral language as the essential communication mode. As Hill (1985) points out, a "fundamental ill to which the learning communities respond is the inadequate amount of intellectual interaction between faculty and students, and between students and students" (p. 1). Usually, interaction is in the form of talk. Learning community students talk with faculty members who help them integrate various points of view. They talk with other students about potential themes and topics, and discuss their thesis outlines and rough drafts with peers. Talk offers learning community students stimulation of thought, exposure to diversity, and the need to clarify one's own thinking in the community. In

brief, interaction is active and vocal in a learning community setting, not limited to the often mechanical and routinized "interaction" of traditional lectures, term papers and examinations.

Additionally, form and structure in language also tend to follow function in learning communities. As the major purpose of the learning community is to make meaning more obvious to students through a general organization around specific intellectual themes, students concentrate on using language to communicate understanding, rather than to emphasize drills, skills and knowledge about language. For example, learning communities encourage **informative** communication by stressing writing and speaking. They promote **affective** communication through discussion of values, expression of opinions and dialogue journals. They provide integrated learning experiences in what quickly become familylike environments and thus encourage **imaginative** communication. They involve students in **ritualistic** communication by engaging them in group discussions where they explore topics and themes. Likewise, they develop student sensitivity to **persuasive** communication by having them defend arguments in discussions and papers.

Consequently, by encouraging students to synthesize knowledge and information from a spectrum of different points of view, to concentrate on dialogue and other forms of active learning with their instructors and peers, and to

experience the dominant functional uses of communication. learning communities supply adult educators with an instructional method that facilitates the integration of functional communication skills into their curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper has described theoretical and practical approaches that illustrate to adult educators the value and means of integrating functional communication skills into their classes. I assume that adult educators, like their elementary and secondary counterparts, will find it beneficial to become aware not only of an approach to teaching oral communication that emphasizes the uses of everyday communication, but also of a specific method for integrating such an approach into their classes and programs.

Fundamentally, though, I recommend these approaches with an acute appreciation that a significant number of American adults lack the basic oral communication skills necessary to function in our institutions and become more effective in their daily lives, and that common sense demands instruction which teaches these skills in the adult education curriculum. Learning communities, for example, "provide a rich and supportive educational environment for high-risk students who need the most help to remain in college and achieve their goals" (Matthews, 1986, p. 47). Thus, I

stress with Miller (1984) that the adult student needing remediation has as much right to expect quality teaching as any other member of the academic community.

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